

THE BITTERSWEET OF SWEETBACK/ OR, SHAKE YO MONEY MAKER

BY DON L. LEE

"If you fathered the image of your concept of the universe, you already got them fighting on your territory."

ald duck in the image of the European-man. Alfred Hitchcock dealt with the images of mystery and suspense and found acute joy in sticking sharp objects into people,

FEW PEOPLE understand as well as the filmmaker the use and manipulation of the image. After all, his job is that of image maker. The images that you create reflect you, reflect your total world, *i.e.*, define where you are at a particular time in space, and are some of the best measurements for your state of consciousness at a given time. Walt Disney made films about animals; he created mickey mouse and don-

ard competed for the "real" European sensibility and, naturally, left the impact of their own personalities and views on their films. All this took place as John Ford perfected the systematic extermination of the red man with the aid of John Wayne and the State Department. Films, as are other creations, are reflections of their creators.

Comment on the Real

There is no need at this time to restate the theme of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. By this time you've probably seen it, read

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it, heard it or re-lived it through countless reenactments on the one reads, which seems to be a rather odd and dangerous under-

street (brothers are now calling each other "Sweetback" as if it is something they grabbed from the unknown). I believe that the movie, the book, the record, plus audience participation have left few of us untouched. But what about the creator of Sweetback? What about Melvin Van Peebles: what can we say about him?

First, if one is honest, we have to admit that Brother Van Peebles is very talented and extremely inventive and (at the risk of sounding too trite) one might argue that he borders on being a genius. After reading two of his books, listening to three of his records, seeing two of his three films and reading countless commentaries on his work, and finally after absorbing several in-depth interviews

taking today, he should be greatly encouraged to see *Sweetback* as reviewed by most of the Black film critics. Let me put it in their words:

Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song is a grotesque, violent and beautifully honest film that takes no crap from whitey and has over-civilized hang-ups while it deals with some specifics of the black experience.

—Sam Washington,
Chicago Sun Times

Blacks simply love the film. The love is profound in a very personal way, a way that says reams about the Black condition.

—Chester Higgins,
Jet Magazine

ing several in-depth interviews published in magazines and newspapers, our assessment is that Melvin Van Peebles is without a doubt an exceptional and a remarkable man—which is to say that he is at all times in tune with his consciousness and, for Black people, he could become a most dangerous and frightening enemy, worse than the white boy, because he's disguised as a brother.

*The Critics: It all Depends on
Your Perspective*

Black film critics are about as new on the mass scene as the Black filmmaker, and this infancy may account for their limited and distorted view of the Black world. If

Jet Magazine

In traditional African folklore, the hero always manages to survive by his wits. And so, while running for his life, Sweetback uses only his brain, a knife, and his sexual prowess to survive. Mr. Van Peebles makes it a point for him not to use a gun, although plenty are available.

—Monroe Anderson,

The National Observer

Van Peebles utilizes that kind of functional insanity with a non-professional cast, he charts a course through cinematic waters no one else has even put a toe in, makes visual revolutionaries

of us all, lets us see a sector of ourselves we wish, perhaps, he had left alone.

—Clayton Riley,
The New York Times

It is the first truly revolutionary Black film made and it is presented to us by a black man.

—Huey P. Newton,
Black Panther Paper

With encouragement like that above, one would be rather naive not to sacrifice another \$3.00 to aid a "brother" even after such disappointments as *Cotton Comes To Harlem*, *Shaft*, *In The Heat Of The Night*, *The Great White Hope*, *The Love Of Ivy*, *They Call Me Mr. Tibbs*, *Slaves*, and Van Peebles' own *Watermelon Man*,

923 brothers and sisters to every square mile. Also included in those 26 square miles are 652 bars, clubs and liquor stores, 360 gas stations, 900 churches and countless bar-b-q shacks, barber shops, beauty shops, assorted stores, and restaurants; to top it off, we have illiteracy and infant mortality rates that are the highest in the country. My point is that we have an abundance of that which we don't need in the Black community. We have 24 hours of bad, negative reflections. Nobody nowhere needs to tell us how we live; we live it everyday. For the world's richest country, we live under some of the worst living conditions extant. Every Black father, mother and child *knows* or will *learn* this. That's definite!

Van Peebles, in his book about

which I literally walked out on. In fact, I can honestly say that the only movie I viewed in which Blacks had dominant roles and I didn't feel betrayed afterwards was *Nothing But A Man*, with Ivan Dixon and Abbey Lincoln, back in the early Sixties.

Black Community 1971

We sometimes tend to oversimplify the problems of the Black community. In Chicago where I reside, African people number more than a million, and out of the 222 square miles of land available in the city, we occupy—but not own—26 square miles, which roughly comes out to about 8.5 percent of the land. This means that there are approximately 76,-

the film, says that he wanted to make a picture about the "*REAL ME*" (Melvin Van Peebles). He also states that the script would be another step in getting the man's foot out of his "ass," which he translated to mean "our collective asses." He feels that "the biggest obstacle to the Black revolution in America is our conditioned susceptibility to the white man's program. In short, the fact is that the white man has colonized our minds. We've been violated, confused and drained by the colonization, and from this brutal, calculated genocide, the most effective and vicious racism has grown, and it is with this starting point in mind and the intention to reverse the process that I went into cinema in

the first fucking place." His aim was to make a film that not only "instructs but entertains."

Now those are some strong words and they do sound "revolutionary," like the brother is really hip and ready to deal with reality. But reality is relative; reality is whatever is real to you. The film opens with one of his few warm reflections of the Black woman. Sisters in a whore house are feeding a starving and homeless young brother. The young brother stays on and becomes a handyman around the house. In the very next scene he is raped by one of the women who, in the act of intercourse, which some have called his "initiation rites," says he has a "sweet sweet back," thus granting him his name and "manhood"

. . . We have the impression of watching theater, not as it is now, but as it once might have been, a morality play or something like that out of the Middle Ages." To me the Middle Ages implies Europe, so from the beginning the stage is set—a European sensibility masquerading through the eyes of Van Peebles as Blackness. Nonsense personified!

Ingredients: get you some sex that borders on pornography (a European invention), a whole lot of minor violence (because the brother still ain't dealing with his condition or the real enemies), a "brother" or "brothers" who are cool (which means to do it better than the white boy—but also—to be cold, mean, hard, a lover, fighter, nonpolitical and hip to his

simultaneously. The danger here is not necessarily the name *per se*, but the equation of sex with manhood. And if this is the case, it seems to me that few of us get past our first initiation, and we therefore confuse manliness with being able to screw well. And, like some sisters say, that's the only myth or stereotype that we haven't protested against.

Reality is whatever is real to you. Van Peebles' reality is that he believes that the stars of his film are "the Black Community." Our first glimpse of Van Peebles' community after the titles is a "freak" show in the whore house. Van Peebles states that "a dingy red carpet has been placed in the center of the room to imply a stage

world which is just a very limited part of the real world). Mix all that together with some color, the killing of a few white cops, glimpses of some jive negroes, good music and pure fantasy and just the right kind of packaging and distribution, and you got a hit. Newsweek said that the movie had already grossed over three million in less than a month.

Comments on some of the scenes

1. After the first incident and Sweetback seeks help from Beatle—the way Van Peebles has Beatle say a whole lot of nothing and then use the toilet (literally, a whole lot of shit) is brilliant.

2. The use of the sister to take the handcuff off is sheer exploita-

tion of both the sister and of sex. After dealing the cops, why didn't he just take the keys out of their pockets?

3. Sweetback's non-identification with Moo-Moo, the militant—"What you mean, *we*?"—was real and in character. (Also, his characterization of Moo-Moo as an ignorant, know-nothing brother is a comment on Van Peebles' feelings toward brothers in the Movement.)

4. The whole motorcycle scene is unnecessary and sheer fantasy. I don't believe any group of white boys (especially the prototype of Hell's Angels—who recently killed a brother at a music festival) are going to stand by and let some brother screw one of their women. No! I can't buy that.

with the subject matter. That's my area. As for the acting—how can Black actors go wrong when they play themselves? And, we understand that Black people don't deal in symbols. We're very concrete people and reflect that which we feel is ourselves even though we've been defined by others. Melvin Van Peebles reflected that part of the Black community that was important to him; so, in effect, it is a reflection and comment on Van Peebles. After all, it is his vision, his statement and his perception of what is to come.

Is *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* a revolutionary film? No! Not in the definitions of a Frantz Fanon, a Malcolm X, or a Lerone Bennett Jr. But we know that smoking pot is revolutionary to

hippy and one straight) chasing Sweetback with dogs, who disagree at first about letting the dogs go, but in the end are in complete accord and unleash them, dramatizes that straight + hippy = white. Excellent imagery all around.

6. The idea of running across the desert to Mexico—especially for a brother who's been a junior hustler and imitation pimp all his life—is nonsense. How is he going to survive in the desert? And anyway, running to Mexico is like running to Washington, D. C.

Conclusions

I will not attempt to comment on film technique. I may be a novice with the camera, but not

whose definitions you are using. But Van Peebles himself said that it had to be "entertaining." Is revolutionary movement entertaining or show business (or, as Imamu Baraka says, "show for business")? What about the use of sex? Can you screw your way to freedom? Is that revolutionary? It seems to me that Van Peebles simply used and overused his own women. In an interview in the underground paper, *Organ* (out of New York city), June 1971, he was asked by the press how he would advise a Black who wanted to be revolutionary to go about making a film. His answer was, "Put a couple chicks on the block, raise the money and make a film."

Anyway, if I'm correct, Van Peebles had Moo-Moo, the militant brother, killed—he called Moo-Moo our future. That, in itself, is a profound image as to where Van Peebles is. If that's revolutionary, we're ready for the camps, and we created them ourselves.

Van Peebles' use of sex and violence as ritual is very commercial and is an excellent merchandising weapon. After reading his account of the problem he had in filming *Sweetback*, we can understand the reasons he had so much sex and violence filmed. He put the word out that he was filming a nudie in order to stay one step ahead of the regular unions which he couldn't afford. Thus he was able to get a non-union crew to film for less money, and the politics of Black-

GER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES." From whom? The police, the brothers who didn't help him, the most visible elements of our suppression? What about the Mellons, the DuPonts, the Rockefellers and Chase Manhattan Bank? What about the real enemies—the State Department, local and federal government? What about the think-tanks at MIT, the Hudson Institute or the Rand Corporation? What about an organized nation that controls the world and ain't worried about no long-lost nigger coming back to collect anything?

The white boy is organized. It's no accident that the only people in the world who are on the bottom are those of color. That's revolutionary! The worldrunners play for keeps. The only film I can think of

ness were subordinated because the crew, for all practical purposes, thought they were filming a stag or pornographic film. But, after all the filming was completed, Van Peebles as editor had the option to take out or leave in that which he wanted without restrictions. As editor, he chose to leave most of the filth in and, therefore, we have his distorted view of the Black community. That's nothing but commercialism and exploitation. When he does try to be political, he still fails. His sign card for the end reads: "A BAADASSSS NIG-

that approaches a serious revolutionary stance is *The Battle of Algiers*, which was after the fact and for Algerians. In the final analysis, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is a limited, money-making, autobiographical fantasy of the odyssey of one Melvin Van Peebles through what he considered to be the Black community, unaware of the fact that we ain't got no "territory" and that this is not 1966, but 1971, the year of the Pentagon Papers.

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